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Abstract

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Importing the law? Possible elements of the Mesopotamian legal tradition in New Kingdom Egypt (1549-1064BCE¹)

Features of New Kingdom justice not attested earlier

- Oracle courts, as attested at Deir el-Medina² and elsewhere³
- Increase in severe corporal punishment: for example, mutilation of nose and ears becomes a standard element in oath formulae⁴
- Detailed protasis-apodosis legal decrees, such as the Karnak Decree of Horemheb⁵ (1328-1298BCE) or the Nauri Decree of Seti I⁶ (1296-1279).

Why might this be connected to Mesopotamia/Semitic law?

- “Hyksos” period (1650-1549BCE) immediately prior to New Kingdom
- Amarna letters/greater exposure to Akkadian in Egypt during New Kingdom
- Legal associations: Akkadian and Egyptian copies of Ramesses II – Hattusili III treaty⁷ (1258BCE), where corporal punishment is a prominent topic
- Mesopotamian law, and broader scholarship, often associated with protasis-apodosis⁸
- Mesopotamian law often associated with severe corporal punishment: for instance, see Code of Hammurabi (1792-1750BCE)⁹, Middle Assyrian Laws¹⁰ (c.1400-1100BCE) etc.

Why might this NOT be connected to Mesopotamia/Semitic law?

- Were earlier periods truly different, or is this down to chance preservation of sources?
- Protasis-apodosis has precedents in the Middle Kingdom (2066-1650BCE): for instance, see 2nd Semna stela of Senusret III (1865BCE)¹¹ or Illahun Medical papyri (c.1800BCE)¹².

¹ All Egyptian dates are calculated according to the chronology set forth in Dodson & Hilton 2004: 287-294, while Mesopotamian dates follow the chronology in van de Mieroop 2007: 302-317.

² McDowell 1990: 143-186.

³ Kákossy 1975: 600-606; Černý 1962: 35-48.

⁴ Lorton 1977: 33-38, 50-51; Tyldesley 2000: 81.

⁵ Kruchten 1981.

⁶ Kitchen 1975-1990: 53-55 (text 24); Davies 1997: 277-308.

⁷ Langdon & Gardiner 1920.

⁸ Bottéro 1992: 125-137, 156-184; Roth 1997.

⁹ Roth 1997: 71-142; Richardson 2000.

¹⁰ Driver & Miles 1935; Roth 1997: 153-194.

¹¹ Sethe 1924: 83-84.

¹² Quirke 2002; Collier & Quirke 2004: 53-64.